Using storytelling to develop thinking skills

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This paper describes how storytelling can be used as a springboard for critical thinking activities which focus on listening and speaking. This consists of integrating storytelling, critical thinking, and primarily oral communication activities in a TESOL context. The method, which is adapted from Fisher (1996), covers a range of pre-listening, listening and post-listening tasks which all serve as stimuli for developing thinking skills by getting students to perform functions such as interpreting, evaluating, speculating, sustaining a dialogue, and inferring. This paper will provide background and practical guidance which will enable teachers to incorporate this storytelling method in the classroom.

本論文は、リスニングやスピーキングに焦点をおく批判的思考法のスプリングボードとして、ストーリーテリングをどのように用いるかについて述べたものである。すなわち、TESOLの状況において、ストーリーテリング、批判的思考法、及び主にオーラルによるコミュニケーション活動を統合するものである。この方法は、

Fisher(1996)を応用したものであるが、リスニング前(pre-listening)、リスニング(listening)、及びリスニング後(post-listening) の課題を包含し、どの課題も、学生に対して、解釈、評価、推測、対話の維持及び推論のような機能を実行させることにより、学生の思考能力を発展させる刺激となるものである。本論文では、教師がこのストーリーテリング法を授業に取り入れるための背景と実際的指導法について述べる。

Storytelling provides a springboard for students to engage in critical thinking through meaningful listening and speaking. Although there is no all-encompassing definition for critical thinking because it consists of an array of skills, for the purpose of this method the scope will be limited to: interpreting, evaluating, speculating, sustaining a dialogue, inferring and sub skills that lie within those functions, some of which overlap. Although critical thinking is often associated with reading and writing, the method presented in this paper, adapted from Fisher (1996), focuses on active listening and speaking about issues of importance. While Fisher's (1996) approach, which entails thinking, learning and creativity, is geared toward developing a wide spectrum of skills for native speaker children, the adapted version presented in this paper consists of a more narrow focus on skills and activities which are deemed to be most relevant to non-native speakers of English who have at least a low-intermediate level of linguistic

competence. The aims of this method, which include linguistic and cognitive development, are achieved through the following four phases of the lesson:

- Phase 1: pre-listening—the theme of the story and keywords are previewed to activate schema.
- Phase 2: listening—the teacher tells the students a story interactively to get the students to begin thinking about it.
- Phase 3: post-listening 1—students discuss questions which get them to interpret, evaluate, speculate, sustain a dialogue, and infer about the story and theme.
- Phase 4: post-listening 2—students do a follow-up activity to develop their thoughts about the story.

Why thinking skills?

One reason why students would benefit from developing thinking skills is because such skills can facilitate language learning, as stated by Ur (1981): "the most natural and effective way for learners to practice talking freely in English is by thinking out some problem or situation together through verbal interchange of ideas" (p. 2). Viewed in this way, thinking activities which get students to speculate about aspects of a story and sustain a dialogue encourage them to engage more deeply in discussion and thereby receive valuable practice Another significant reason, argued by Davidson (1995), is that in countries which have Confucian-based education systems such as Japan, the "hierarchically-controlled, factual exam-oriented education system naturally produces uninquisitive, uncritical, and unreflective students." The result is that students are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with practices which are considered standard in English-speaking countries, such as expressing opinions through discussion. Davidson's (1995) study shows that Japanese students often feel that they do not have opinions or that they cannot explain or justify the opinions that they do have. However, his study also found that some students were receptive to learning thinking skills and showed progress in their ability to express opinions and explain them. The experience of Day (2003) bears out this claim: "I have found students from Taiwan, China, Korea, and Japan receptive to instruction in critical thinking. Not only are they receptive, they have no difficulty in engaging in the process." Davidson (1995) concluded that students "appreciate a thinking approach to education and…gave high marks to teachers who 'made them think' [showing]…a hunger for depth in learning over superficiality." My personal experience teaching at a Japanese university has confirmed for me that students are capable of doing this and in some cases are motivated when given the opportunity to practice thinking. This is why it is worthwhile to get students to practice thinking skills in a principled and constructive manner.

Principles for live storytelling, selection and adaptation

There are a variety of ways for a teacher to present a story to a class, such as: reading from a book, playing a recording, having the students read the story, reciting it from memory, or telling the story while referring to notes. All of these ways of telling a story have their advantages

and disadvantages. However, for this method, the optimal approach is the oral tradition of *live storytelling*: telling the story in a spoken narrative without notes, while interacting with the audience. As stated by Morgan and Rinvolucri (1988), by telling a story in this way "one can shape the story to one's own needs…[and] expand or modify the form of one's telling as the occasion demands" (p. 8). Live storytelling is not focused on the words of the story, but the meaning conveyed by both verbal and nonverbal means.

Live storytelling

Although not everyone is a natural storyteller, it is possible to develop storytelling skills. For this method, it is necessary for the teacher to make an attempt to hone such skills by practicing. The following guidelines will assist with this endeavor.

Preparation

The teacher ought to know the story very well. This will enable *telling* the story rather than reading it. If this is impossible, cue cards with keywords are an option but should be used sparingly because they detract from the focus on the audience. If one practices the story in advance, cue cards should not be necessary. The purpose is to tell the story in a relaxed and informal manner, the way one would narrate an event to a friend. Morgan and Rinvolucri (1988) justify telling rather than reading because it is "sometimes fluent, sometimes hesitant and uncertain, broken by irregular pauses, but always definitely *spoken* language, the language of personal communication that is so often absent from the foreign-language classroom" (p. 8).

Visual support

The teacher ought to make sure that students can see key visual aids, such as: gesture, facial expression, miming, props, and pictures to guide comprehension. Pictures can be shown on an OHP, with PowerPoint or can also be quickly sketched on the board to illustrate something that may be unfamiliar to students and also to provide a visual anchor for further reference. It is also useful to do this with keywords of the story.

Audience monitoring

The teacher ought to maintain eye contact and awareness of the audience. While telling a story, it is important to be aware of whether or not the students are following it and paying attention. Stories should always be adapted to suit the level of the students. This entails grading and limiting the language so that the stories serve as comprehensible input for the students, which according to Krashen's (1981) acquisition-based methodology, could be described as $i+1$ (grading the language, i.e. input, so that it is slightly above the level of the students). By engaging the audience in this way, maximum comprehensibility can be achieved.

Using voice and other effects

The teacher's voice is crucial for enhancing the storytelling experience. The pace, tone and volume of the voice should be varied. Pausing for dramatic effect and to make the narrative easier to follow is also highly effective (Ellis & Brewster, 2002, p. 19). Also, music and lighting can serve to intensify the story.

Story selection

Where can a teacher find good stories? And what kind of story is appropriate for a particular class? According to Fisher (1996), "a good story arouses the interest and involvement" of the students (p. 5). The two main criteria that Morgan and Rinvolucri (1988) use for story selection are: "is this a story that *we* would enjoy telling and is this a story *our students* might find entertaining or thought-provoking?" (p. 9). In addition to story resources like personal anecdote, newspapers, fiction, movies, and children's stories, the following two books contain a stock of multicultural stories well-suited to this method:

- *Stories for Thinking* by Robert Fisher (1996): this book contains 30 engaging short stories which include thinking questions for each story.
- *The Story Giant* by Brian Patten (2001): this book has many interesting short stories which are suitable for this kind of storytelling.

Adapting stories

Adaptation consists of boiling down the story to its essence for telling it to a particular class since a story needs to be adapted each time it is told. Being visual, grading and limiting language, trying to get the feel of the story by focusing on the meaning rather than the words, and involving the audience are important for adapting a story to a particular occasion of telling. Morgan and Rinvolucri (1988) recommend that stories be reviewed and stored as skeletons: "the skeleton should give, in minimal form, a plot outline, background information where necessary, and a certain amount of character detail…[it] merely provides the bare frame of the story for the teller to work from, and must not be referred to *during* a telling" (p. 9).

The four phases of a storytelling lesson

Phase 1: Pre-listening

Any activity which can activate the students' schema regarding the theme is a good point of departure. One way to do this is by giving the students a few general discussion questions to get them thinking about the theme. Another option is providing the students with keywords or pictures to speculate about the story's theme and events.

Phase 2: Listening

As the teacher is telling the story, he or she pauses to involve students in what is happening. Although pausing the story may interfere with the flow of the narrative, the purpose of doing this is to get the students more engaged in the story by thinking about it as it is unfolding. Depending upon the class size, students can do the following in pairs or in a teacher led, full class discussion.

- *Predicting*: "what do you think is going to happen next?" This can be done at any significant point of the story.
- *Speculating*: "what would you do in this situation?" "What do you think the character should do?"
- *Summarizing*: "what has happened so far?" Recapping the main events of the story can be useful to keep everyone on track.

- *Creating an ending*: before hearing the real ending, students are asked to make their own version, which need not be a prediction—it is entirely up to them how they end the story. This is followed by the teacher telling the "real" ending followed by an evaluation of all of the endings in which the students give reasons why they like or dislike various endings.

Phase 3: Post-listening 1—Discussing

In this phase, the students are given discussion questions which are geared toward exploring the story by thinking about it. The questions should be written with consideration of the students' level. In addition to the questions that the students receive, they are also free to discuss their own questions about aspects of the story which they did not understand or want to investigate further. The following are some of the critical thinking functions which the questions are intended to elicit, all of which involve exchanging opinions.

- *Interpreting*: assigning meaning to events in the story.

  What does x mean in the story?

  What is the story about?

  What kind of story is it?

  What questions do you have about the story's meaning?

- *Evaluating*: judging value or quality based on standards. This includes ranking importance of things or ideas, distinguishing right versus wrong/ true versus untrue, and any other judgments which are relevant to the story or the theme.

  Did this character do the right thing? Why or why not?

  Rank all of the characters in order of responsibility for what happened.

- *Speculating*: imaginative thinking, making intelligent guesses, predictions, considering consequences using *what if*, looking at aspects of the story from different points of view.

  What will happen next?

  Why do you think that happened?

  What would have happened in this story if…?

  How did this character feel about what happened?

  What would you have done in this situation?

  How would you change this story into a Hollywood movie?

- *Sustaining a dialogue*: promoting more thoughtful responses and fluency by asking probing follow-up questions to get students to explain their thinking.

  What do you think?

  Why do you think that?

  Can you give a reason?

What do you mean by that?

How do you know that is true?

Can you think of an example?

Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- *Inferring*: reading between the lines of the story by evaluating clues to reach a conclusion.

  What is the moral of the story?

  What does this character believe/need/want?

Ideally, the students ought to discuss the questions in pairs or small groups. But in a very small class (six or less) the teacher could lead the discussion as an objective mediator. The purpose of the speaking phase is to get students to think more deeply about the story and consider ideas prompted by the teacher that may not ordinarily occur to them.

Phase 4: Post-listening 2—Following up

Finally, the students are given an activity which builds on the thinking they have done in phase 3. The purpose of this last phase is for the students to go further in their processing of the story by personalizing it. To choose which follow-up activity best suits a particular class, the teacher ought to take into account the needs of the class, the level, variation of activities, and the way that the story lends itself to certain kinds of activities.

- *Sharing*: pairs who collaborated in phase 3 compare their results with another pair or individuals/pairs share their findings from phase 3 with the whole class.
- *Visual response*: drawing a picture and then discussing its significance in small groups.
- *Role-play*: the students to act out scenes from the story or hypothetical scenes involving characters from the story.
- *Drama*: students create and perform their version of the story, taking whatever liberties they like in their interpretation. A drama can be followed by discussion questions generated by students and/or the teacher.
- *Written response*: students write a letter to one of the characters from *the point of view* of a different character in the story. Then the teacher randomly hands out the letters and students respond from the point of view of the character to whom the letter is written.
- *Question generation*: each pair makes a list of questions which they find puzzling or interesting. Then each pair chooses their best two questions and writes them on the board. This is followed by discussion.
- *Research project*: groups are given the assignment to research a relevant topic and present findings to the class.
- *Show and tell*: the students are told to bring in an object which represents the theme of the story.

They show the object to the class (or broken into groups) and explain why it represents the theme. This is followed by questions. Example: if the theme of the story is beauty, then the students bring in an object which represents beauty to them.

Alternative approach options

There are many configurations for these techniques, and the teacher ought to experiment in order to find what works best. Following are some additional options which may be useful when variation is desired:

Jigsaw Storytelling: in a group of two to four students, each gets a different story, tells it to their group and then leads a discussion about it. To prepare for this, students who have the same story meet first, read their story together and generate their own thinking questions for the story.

Writing Exchange: rather than discussing the story, the students write their responses to questions and then exchange with a partner and respond in writing to what the other has written.

Story Differences: the teacher splits the class into group A and group B. One group remains in class and the other goes outside. The teacher tells version A and then sends group A outside. Then the teacher tells version B. Following this, students in pairs compare their versions of the story and try to find 10 differences. This is followed by the phase 3 post-listening discussion.

Assessment/evaluation

For phases 1-3, the teacher can evaluate the students' degree of participation according to a rubric which entails effort, engagement, and use of English. Phase 4 activities, most of which lead to a product that can be presented to the class, can be assessed more thoroughly depending upon the task.

Conclusion

This method offers great flexibility for English teachers in a variety of contexts to use storytelling for developing thinking skills. By capturing the students' attention with an intriguing story which is told in a compelling way, the teacher is more likely to engage students in the thinking process which this method outlines. The thinking functions outlined in this paper—interpreting, evaluating, speculating, sustaining a dialogue, and inferring—could be taught explicitly or not, depending upon the students. The purpose of the questions is to get students to think by eliciting specific thinking functions even if the students are not conscious of the fact that they are performing such thinking functions. By challenging the students to think more deeply about the story, the teacher provides them with an opportunity to develop both linguistically and cognitively—both of which are worthwhile and complementary goals in the teaching of English.

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Appendix 1

A storytelling lesson model: The professor and the boatman

Using the above framework and principles, the teacher may try the following story with a class. All of the necessary materials will be provided for each phase.

Phase 1: Pre-listening

The teacher tells the class: *today I'm going to tell you a story. First, please discuss these questions with your partner.*

1. Do you like learning? Why or why not?
2. What is something new that you would like to learn?
3. What do you know about geography, history and science? Are these important? Why or why not?

Phase 2: Listening—The professor and the boatman

The teacher uses this skeleton as a basis to develop and adapt the story for the class.

The teacher tells the class: *now I'm going to tell you the story. Please listen carefully.*

Poor old boatman lived near a river.

Life hard, he accepted it.

Learned about life talking to passengers.

Liked slow paced life. Content. Time to think.

One day man with shiny briefcase came. Wealthy, big city person.

Took him across the river.

Man spoke: have you studied history?

Old boatman said no.

Man very surprised, insults boatman for ignorance.

Boatman never went to school.

Man asks about geography.

Boatman knows nothing.

Man insults more. Shocked. Questioning boatman about history and geography.

Ask students: *Can you summarize what has happened so far?*

Ask students: *What do you think will happen next?*

Man then asks about science. Man is scientist/ professor. Thinks science most important of all. Told boatman his ignorance equals death.

Boatman very sad for being so ignorant and insulted.

Ask students: *What would you do if you were the boatman?*

Dark clouds come. Waves. Boat shaking. Rain. Thunder.

Professor can't swim. Never learned.

Big wave, boat capsizes. Both fall into water.

Ask students: *What happens next? How does the story end?*

The boatman couldn't find professor. Swam back to shore.

Professor sinks, holding briefcase tightly.

—Indian folk story, Fisher (1996)

Phase 3: Post-listening 1—Thinking about the story

The teacher tells the class (and writes on the board): *read these questions and circle 10 that you want to ask your partner.*

1. Did you like the story? Why or why not?
2. What kind of person was the boatman? What did he look like?
3. What do you know about the professor? What did he look like?
4. Why did the professor think learning history, geography, and science were important? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. Do you think the boatman really didn't know *anything* about history, geography or science? Why or why not?
6. Do you agree with the professor? Or do you think maybe the old man knew about some other important things?
7. What is the moral of the story?
8. What did the boatman tell his wife when he got home that night?
9. Have you ever met anyone like the professor?

10. Is what you learn in school more important than what you learn outside of school? Why or why not?
11. Have you ever had an experience in which you felt like the boatman?
12. Is this a good story for children? Why or why not?
13. Do you like listening to stories in English? Why or why not?
14. If the boatman had learned to read, how would he be different?
15. Can knowledge be a bad thing sometimes? Why?
16. How did the ending make you feel?
17. Why do children and teenagers go to school?
18. What is wisdom? What is knowledge? What is the difference?
19. What was the boatman's boat like?
20. What are three important things that you have learned? Why are they important for you?
21. Make a list of the classes that you are taking in school now. List them in the *order of their importance*, from the most important class to the least important class. Explain your choices.
22. Do you think the boatman's life will be different after this experience? How? Or why not?
23. Why do you think the boatman didn't want to live in a city?
24. Why was the briefcase so important in the story? What does it represent?
25. What do you think the boatman and the professor would say to each other if they could talk after the story ended?

—This questioning technique in which students eliminate questions they do not like is called "revenge questions," Morgan and Rinvolucri (1988)

Phase 4: Post-listening 2—Role-play

The teacher tells the class (and writes the steps down on the board as they are explained): *now you and your partner will do a role-play.*

Step 1: discuss question number 25 with your partner.

Step 2: role play this conversation with your partner for at least 2 minutes. Imagine that the boatman and the professor meet after the events of the story.

Student A: you are the boatman.

Student B: you are the professor.

Step 3: then switch roles.

Step 4: then answer this question: what did you learn about their points of view?